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# Self-Presentation, Kitsch, Irony:

## German Sound Film around 1930

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### ABSTRACT

Around 1930, the shift toward sound film led German filmmakers back to the medium itself even as they moved in new aesthetic directions. Adopting a new self-reflexive attitude, they shifted the filmic apparatus onto the image, engaging narrative form to consider cinema's value in popular culture. This article investigates how sound films reflected their new audiovisual mode through aesthetic self-referentiality, particularly in operetta films. Often considered escapist and ideologically suspect by contemporary critics, these films reflected the kitsch and Americanized aesthetic for which they were criticized with playful, ironic self-awareness.

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### SELF-REPRESENTATION IN SOUND FILM

“LET’S CREATE SOMETHING,” Carl Jöken tells his colleagues Max Hansen and Paul Morgan in the opening scene of *Das Kabinett des Dr. Larifari* (The Cabinet of Dr. Larifari, Robert Wohlmut, DE 1930).<sup>1</sup> The three characters (Jöken, the German tenor; Hansen, the cabaret artist/opera singer; and Morgan, the Austrian comedian) are playing “themselves,” sitting in a sparsely-furnished Berlin coffeehouse and trying to decide on a money-making venture: “It would have to be something where we could make some quick cash.” The poster hanging behind them proclaims “100% Sprech- und Tonfilm: Das blonde Donaukind vom Rhein (100% Talking and Sound Film: The Blond Danube-Child from the Rhine)” and inspiration strikes: they’ll establish a sound-film company. “That’s the way to make a million!” Hansen proclaims. Although none of them seems to have the budget for this venture, Morgan comments decisively: “Nothing stands between us and our film company!” In a seemingly surrealist comedy such as *Larifari*, it appears entirely possible to found film companies without the financial means to do so—after

a montage sequence reminiscent of avant-garde films of the 1920s, the three have become managing directors of the fictional “Trio-Film” company, complete with secretary, office, and an enviable location in an impressive high-rise building.

In contrast with the United States, where *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, USA) had heralded the start of the sound film era in 1927 to great financial success, the German transition to sound began only in 1929. Around 1930—the year in which *Das Kabinett des Dr. Larifari* appeared and sound film entered the theater of industrial exploitability (Wedel 309)—new structures, cultural practices, and forms of interaction with other media such as radio and phonograph developed around the film industry. The effects of synchronous playback also marked a significant shift in the audience’s cinematic experience: instrumental accompaniment, which had once imparted a sense of live performance to silent film screenings, was replaced with the aesthetically novel experience of pre-recorded sound and image.

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to the translator of this paper, Dinah Lensing-Sharp.

*Das Kabinett des Dr. Larifari* follows the founders of the Trio-Film company through a series of unsuccessful endeavors to create a viable cinematic product, depicting each abortive idea in the form of short, cabaret-style comic interludes. The film's format thus reflects the multilateral transition process taking place in the German film industry around 1930. The film focuses on the medium's formal qualities, on other genre films, as well as public discourse concerning sound film. The brief scene described above engages for example with numerous myths about early sound film and thus undertakes a form of *self-presentation*. The three protagonists—in taking an affirmative stance regarding sound film—agree not only that the new technology is the future, but also that it will make them rich. However, the film does not always

technology and making filmmaking techniques visible to the audience. In particular, operettas and musical films consolidated their new position at the center of sound film by constantly referencing their newly audio-visual form. Plots often revolved around musical numbers, which transformed actors into singing, dancing stars of the silver screen. Eric Rentschler writes of these films:

In the process, the film shows us the mediation of a self-conscious mass culture as well as revealing its illusory and false constitution, a dream machinery that openly acknowledges the spurious quality of its productions—'zu schön, um wahr zu sein.' (104)

These self-reflexive and, occasionally, self-critical moments in early sound film—that are, according to Rentschler, 'too beautiful to be true'—remained mostly unrecognized by contemporary critics. In sweeping criticisms of the apparent decline in aesthetic value between sound film and silent film, many feared that the advent of sound would allow a new, unartistic realism to replace the fantastic, poetic, and dreamlike qualities that still characterized silent film, especially Expressionist film. By 1932, it had become clear that sound film had a permanent place in German cinemas, prompting film theorist and critic Rudolf Arnheim to comment pessimistically:

We met the arrival of sound film with distrust. It seemed, after all, that it would have to destroy all the exceptional qualities of silent film that we had loved. Then, we became more hopeful, because we admitted that sound film would be able to replace the attractions that it destroyed with new ones of its own. Since then, it has become apparent that sound film desires to make as little use of these new possibilities as possible. It has destroyed, but without replacing anything. (42)

In addition to aesthetic condemnations, certain critics expressed ideological concerns in their opposition toward sound film. Operettas and comedy films were

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portray their dealings in the new medium in a positive light, but rather ironizes its own media praxis. The film poster in the scene at the beginning of *Das Kabinett des Dr. Larifari* evidences this attitude in its advertisement of "Das blonde Donaukind vom Rhein," which satirizes the huge number of musical films set on the Rhine River or by the Danube in Vienna (Müller 358). The title's absurd evocation of both romanticized rivers ironically recalls the indiscriminate use of such stereotypical settings in films of the period.

### **German Sound Film in Film Historiography**

As evidenced by *Das Kabinett des Dr. Larifari*, around 1930 German cinema was struck by a "wave of truly auto-thematic [*autothematische*] or self-reflexive works" (Schweinitz 375), both aesthetically and in terms of content. Films created during this period engaged in a form of self-presentation by centering sound film

criticized particularly harshly for their tendency toward naïveté and escapist themes, especially in an era of economic and political precarity. Siegfried Kracauer typifies this view in his remarks on sound film in his book *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, published in American exile in 1947. In Kracauer's view, an aesthetic tendency toward totalitarianism can retrospectively be read in the German cinema in the interwar period. Pursuing "Kracauer's reflex" (Hagener and Hans 7) many years later, some film historiographers have asserted a teleological trajectory from early German cinematic works to the National Socialist takeover of the film industry after 1933. For the most part, the only films from this period to attain canonical status came from "auteur" directors such as Fritz Lang, Max Ophüls, or Robert Siodmak. By contrast, many historiographers found it difficult to reconcile the popularity of sound film comedies, which struggled for decades to shake their historical association with fascism.

Since the 1990s, a new historiographic methodology has gained traction among film scholars. Important critics include Thomas Elsaesser, Anton Kaes, Corinna Müller, Karl Prümm, and Jörg Schweintz. They propose a new way of viewing interwar cinema in which early sound film is not lacking in creativity or innovation; rather, it bears witness to an inventive, imaginative way of dealing with new possibilities for media. This pertains especially to genre films, including comedies and operettas (Bordwell and Thompson 219).

In keeping with insights offered by these critics, in this essay I would like to investigate the multifaceted aesthetic self-referentiality of German cinema around 1930. To this end, I will locate the terms "self-presentation" and "irony," as well as contemporary watchwords such as "kitsch" and "Americanization," within the framework of this complex historical period. These terms will guide my analyses in case studies of *Der Schuss im Tonfilmstudio* (The Shot in the Talker Studio, Alfred Zeiser, DE 1930) and *Ich bei Tag und Du bei Nacht* (I by Day, You by Night, Ludwig Berger, DE 1932).

In 1930, "kitsch" was effectively already a byword that quickly became an expression of distaste, and, as Norbert Elias wrote in 1935, for the "uneducated tastes of capitalist society," (qtd. in Dettmar and Küpper 157) which, according to sound film's detractors, brought audiences to the cinema in droves. Today, however, the term is often used in postmodern cultural analysis and may denote a conscious engagement with mass culture. My readings of films from this period are influenced by the fact that this enlightened, media-savvy mode of viewing (and hearing) arose as early as the 1930s. Much like kitsch, discussions of "irony" as a methodological tool appeared very little in film studies or film historiography until James MacDowell's 2016 study on "Irony in Film," in which he conceives of the term systematically and renders it applicable to the study of film. In my historical analysis, I consider it a sign that audiences (as well as filmmakers) were not naïve spectators, but very much informed about innovations in the cinematic medium. Furthermore, I understand irony not only as a tool of marginalized but of mainstream cinema as well, an aesthetic and narrative device attuned to the tastes of a media-literate public in a moment of historic transformation in film technology. Around 1930, we can see the groundwork being laid for a form of cinematic self-deprecation through play with new equipment and innovative design media, the foregrounding of its own artificiality, and the ostentatious exaggeration of kitsch. Depictions of irony in this historical configuration may be regarded as not (only) a subversion of but also a playful engagement with cinematic conventions. Films maintain a certain distance from their own aesthetics and construct a "strategy of complicity" (160) between filmmakers and audience, as Elsaesser writes, because "such pleasurable playfulness prepares a media technology for the market place and for mass-consumption" (158).

### The Transition to Sound Film in Germany

Film historiographers generally consider Germany one of the few film markets able to hold its own against the dominance of Hollywood exports in the 1920s:

Hollywood never won the control in Germany which it wielded almost everywhere else. At no time did American feature film imports constitute a clear majority of German market offerings (Saunders 5).

In 1929, the first American sound films successfully debuted in German cinemas, leading German film producers to fear an American incursion on their national market. The accrued box-office earnings from Hollywood films such as *The Singing Fool* (Lloyd Bacon, USA 1928), first shown in Berlin in 1929, made film production companies and cinema owners more eager to invest in sound film (Mühl-Benninghaus 127). Ufa, the largest production company in Germany at the time, decided that same year to transition to the new technology and planned to begin producing exclusively sound films. Cinemas quickly followed suit: by February 1931, less than two years after the earliest reviews of sound film, the majority of German cinemas had been outfitted with sound film projectors (Müller 25).

The rapid rise of sound film presented structural problems for German cinema. Legal conflicts with Hollywood regarding sound film patents (a situation which led to the dissolution of the “sound film peace accord” [*Tonfilmfrieden*] of 1930) (Müller 31) and fundamental changes to working conditions in the industry were only two sources of particular uncertainty for filmmakers in the transition away from silent film. The worldwide financial crisis further complicated the already-expensive process of retrofitting equipment and converting film studios; at the same time, filmmakers were forced into a state of constant creative output in order to fill the financial gaps left by a lack of new imports. Certain veteran directors voiced aesthetic concerns—many of them would simply have to come to terms with the novel situation if they wished to remain active in the industry. As I have already suggested, German intellectuals and critics of the medium only developed a taste for sound film with some difficulty. Ufa’s first sound-film team, an object of special scrutiny for critics, received overwhelmingly negative reviews. This led to a “crisis of confidence

between film and criticism [*Vertrauenskrise zwischen Film und Kritik*]” (“Fünf Kritiker nehmen das Wort”), whereby the situation worsened to such an extent that talks between the lead organization of the film industry [*Spitzenorganisation der Filmwirtschaft*] and the professional association of the German press [*Standesvertretung der deutschen Presse*] had to take place (Müller 39-40).

Film historiographers also attributed disputes about the value of sound film to the audience itself. To that end, an audience poll was conducted at the premiere of Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Blackmail* (GB 1929) which supposedly proved the audience’s preference for silent film. Both silent and sound versions of the film were shown to German viewers, and according to a subsequent survey, only 40% favored the sound version (Mühl-Benninghaus 223). It is impossible to assess this complex historical situation in its entirety; however, early (American) sound films’ box office earnings along with increasing numbers of spectators at sound film showings in Germany (Mühl-Benninghaus 106) definitively spurred the industry-wide choice to transition to sound film (Mühl-Benninghaus 356). At the very least, German audiences’ alleged lack of listening habits must be put into perspective with Germany’s rapidly-expanding media landscape. Innovative connections arising between vinyl records, sound film, and radio (as well as brand-new possibilities for cross-media advertising) around 1930 are a testament to the existence of a media-savvy public enthusiastic about new forms of technology.

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***Self-preservation then becomes a playful or even mystifying narrative component - a variant of the self-advertisement which announces its capability of creating and shattering an illusion all at once.***

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## Media Transition and Self-Presentation

In moments of transition, media forms become increasingly self-referential, as David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins note in “Rethinking Media Change”:

... a deep and even consuming self-consciousness is often a central aspect of emerging media themselves. Aware of their novelty, they engage in a process of self-discovery that seeks to define and foreground the apparently unique attributes that distinguish them from existing media forms. (4)

With its complex historical circumstances in mind, the omnipresent self-referentiality in early sound film appears to be an expression of the urgent desire for legitimacy (Prümm 279). Sabine Hake points out similar mechanisms in her study of film around 1913, in which she writes of the first feature-length films that

the instances of self-referentiality serve largely affirmative functions; they belong to a new industry promoting its products. The hallucinations of cinema, whether in form of narrative structures or special effects, represent a form of advertisement, a showcase for technical accomplishments as well as the technological imagination. [...] As ‘transitional objects,’ so to speak, these films show audiences how to appreciate the cinema and its increasingly sophisticated products, how to deal with feelings of astonishment and disbelief, and how to gain satisfaction from the playful awareness of the apparatus and the simultaneous denial of its presence. (37-38)

However, according to Robert Stam’s study “Reflexivity in Film and Literature,” this specific form of self-reflexivity (as it appears in media transitions) does not always lead to a radical breaking of the illusion or resemble a more fundamental problematization of the narrative. Films created around 1930, just like early feature-length films, present the strongest evidence that reflexive strategies may also be used when presenting to a broader audience.

Self-presentation then becomes a playful or even mystifying narrative component—a variant of the self-advertisement which announces its capability of creating and shattering an illusion all at once. If the story takes place on a film set, then filming equipment can literally be shifted into focus and be presented to a wider audience as a technological marvel. Along similar lines, Elsaesser writes regarding early sound film: “The auto-reflexive gestus, usually considered a sign of the literary avant-garde and artistic modernism here shows itself at home among popular stereotypes and frankly commercial intentions” (157-158).

### *Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier*

Alfred Zeisler’s *Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier* (DE 1930) is a rich example of a sound film centered on the capabilities of the new technology. With a script by Curt Siodmak, this crime thriller—produced by film company Ufa—unfolds in Ufa’s very own sound-film studio.

Even before the eponymous shot in the sound-film studio is fired, killing an actress, the film simulates its own interpretation in the opening sequence: a couple share an intimate kiss, and suddenly a loud ringing can be heard. After the tone has rung a few times, a close-up of a clock fills the screen, revealing the source of the sound. This reminds the young woman (Berthe Ostyn) that she must leave. Suddenly, the doorbell rings, and she disappears behind a curtain as the young man’s fiancée (Gerda Maurus) enters the sitting room. A struggle ensues between the man (Harry Frank) and his fiancée—she suspects his betrayal. After the woman is seen holding what appears to be a pistol, we hear a voice offstage shouting “cut!” and we understand that this is a film within a film. The entire film crew and equipment can now be seen—what appeared to be a sitting room just moments before is now exposed as mere backdrop.

The revelation of the film crew functions to tip off the audience that the film’s ostensible plot takes place within the diegetic frame of the film-within-a-film, recalling the



auto-thematic tendencies of early sound film which I have already mentioned. In addition, this sequence creates a hierarchy between sound and image which will hold true throughout the film: several central plot elements (the clock, the doorbell, the shot, the director's voice offstage) can be *heard* before they appear onscreen. Using this device, *Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier* argues its "merits" against silent film, as Jürgen Kasten summarizes:

More complex exterior elements such as internal incidents and plots, when articulated linguistically, could be integrated more quickly and less complicatedly into the narrative construction. [...] Altogether, a faster-paced story and an expanded narrative scope may be achieved, which conveyed the story more concisely and made it comprehensible. Within the limited scope of a 90-minute feature film, greater possibilities for narrative economy as well as for excess and editing (in the visual realm as well as in sound) opened up, since a tighter plot development had become possible. (53)

In *Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier*, the pool of images is unbound; sound film signifies the new means of incorporating the cinematic "offstage." With the bright, clear striking of the hour, the steps on the parquet floor, and the ring of the doorbell, *Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier* also indicates an entirely different, new quality which—isolated from the narrative economy—represents the acoustic charm of the medium: "For the first time, in the all-singing all-talking pictures [...] all kinds of noises are suddenly present: what smoke and the leaves were for early cinema were the random noise and sound-effects for the movies" (Elsaesser 163). In this way, early sound films self-consciously thrust ordinary acoustic phenomena

into the foreground and turned them into an audible sensation. The eponymous shot is initially discernible as a purely acoustic phenomenon before the consequences become obviously visible after some delay.

A shot is, in fact, fired in *Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier*, since the actress playing the lover hiding behind the curtain is soon found by the crew, dead from a gunshot wound. They immediately call lead detective Möller (Alfred Beierle) and the police chief (Ernst Stahl-Nachbaur) to the scene of the crime. These men take a tour of the film studio, demonstrating to the spectator—apparently "à propos of nothing"—what the sound film cross in Babelsberg had to offer in technological sophistication. In this way, they learn that the shot could not have been fired from the actress' pistol because she is found holding a prop gun in her hand, since "only a primed shot achieves the same quality of sound as a real one." The huge amount of insider information (often fiction and not always state-of-the-art) seems to lend an aura of authenticity or documentary to the film's self-presentation, and the new medium becomes sensationalized through its uniqueness.

Film equipment appears as a frequent visual motif throughout *Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier* (Fig. 1). The film celebrates the machine as the embodiment of modernity—with an attitude reminiscent of New Objectivity<sup>2</sup>—in its ability to record reality neutrally. By the end of the film, the apotheosis of this cinematic self-presentation seems obvious: the sound-camera reveals recorded evidence of a conversation between murderer and victim in the dark, which the image-only camera could not capture. The detectives confront the murderer in the studio's screening room with his own recording and force him to confess his crime.

<sup>2</sup> "Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) denotes an artistic style in Germany from the interwar period. The meaning of the term 'Neue Sachlichkeit' has shifted over time as it became associated with different art movements. Interpreted as an aesthetic value, however, it always signifies an orientation toward realism at the same time as a turning away from Expressionism. An interest in facts, facticity, attention to 'the thing itself,' and objectivity typifies New Objective works. As an aesthetic manifesto, for instance in photography, this means an enthusiasm for motifs such as 'city,' machinery, or modern architecture. On a theatrical level, New Objectivity comes to terms with unvarnished depictions of the world; it considers itself obliged to a certain realism and attempts to present life 'as it is.'" (Kappelhoff 120).





**Fig.1** | *Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier* (The Shot in the Talker Studio, Alfred Zeiser, DE 1930), from the Collection of the Austrian Film Museum, Vienna.

This is the final evidence of sound film's victory, only hinted at in the first scene through the striking of the clock, the doorbell, and the director's voice calling off-screen. These elements establish a hierarchy between audio and visual means of conveying information, finally made explicit in sound film's resolution of the whodunit.

### **"Kitschoperetten"**

Nearly all early sound films relied on musical interludes to demonstrate the impressive benefits of the new medium. The genres that adhered to this principle most

consistently were musical films and operettas. Along the same lines as the auto-thematic comedy *Das Kabinett des Dr. Larifari* and the self-reflexive crime thriller *Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier*, the worlds depicted by these films resisted diegetic boundaries, instead demonstrating their new technological capabilities for self-reflexivity:

This kind of cinema relies less on the closed subject, psychological motivation, and the creation of sense in narrative structures and more on episodic highlights and action—but above all on an audience familiar with typical narrative strategies and patterns. The audience



must be able to appreciate the ingenuity of choosing to either adhere to or break with genre conventions, as well as derive some part of their enjoyment from the plot's predictability. (Hagener and Hans 11)

Many critics considered operettas a symptom of sound film's less promising qualities, particularly due to the new medium's prevalence in the genre. Cinematic operettas developed a reputation for insufficiently reflecting the serious changes which political, economic, and social life were undergoing at the time. Additionally, many critics accused such films of portraying social ills too glamorously, essentially promoting a kind of propaganda for an uncritical, unpolitical, pro-consumerist lifestyle. Theatre critic Herbert Jhering agreed with the critical canon and, in his text "Der erste Tonfilm" from June 1929, appointed the "mendaciousness of the dying kitsch operettas" and the "melodiously sentimental music" (572) of same as a sign of their escapist tendencies. One popular motif in many operettas was considered particularly problematic and often led to the predictability of the plots in such productions—narratives usually followed the "backstage" lives of popular figures or traced their ascension to fame, with many characters originating in poor or working-class families before successfully breaking through to become theater or film stars. For a large part of the population, however, the financial crisis precluded any real hope of social mobility or economic prosperity. Such stories were widely popular at the time because they expressed the new technology's potential as no other genre could. The sensational new song-and-dance interludes instantly pulled spectators into the story. Talented performers from various other kinds of entertainment, such as *variété* and cabaret, performed as characters in the worlds of these films—a strategy utilized in Hollywood (with Al Jolson, for instance) as well as in German cinema.

In the same text from 1929, Jhering additionally notes: "Certainly, kitsch is immortal" (572), marking the importance of kitsch as a symptom of its time. Kitsch is named again and again throughout contemporary criticism, linking the public debates surrounding sound film to more general ideas about the industrial mass production of aesthetic goods. In Ernst Bloch's writings of the period, as well as in those of Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Robert Musil, and Norbert Elias, kitsch and its associated constructs appear as keywords and represent—often tacitly—a concept running counter to classical notions of art. For instance, we may consider Kant's idea of disinterested pleasure as diametrically opposed to kitsch. To Kant, pleasure in true beauty has to be undisturbed, for art shouldn't evoke any desire for the object itself; instead it should intellectually engage the subject. Kitsch, on the other hand, encompasses the idea of aesthetic products that are only pleasant, sentimental, touching, or escapist—but do not inspire engrossment of any kind, as Ute Dettmar and Thomas Küpper note: "It was certainly significant for the interwar period that kitsch be understood as a sign of the general cultural decay: the prevalence of kitsch and of popular culture altogether can be considered a symptom of a rapidly-spreading societal disease" (157). It was particularly the "mass entry of images and reproductions into the (petit-) bourgeois household" (94) and the still-new mass culture which were governed by such an aesthetic and horrified critics at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Film, cheap books, adventure novels, and "Backfischliteratur"<sup>3</sup> were shaped in these conversations around kitsch into constellations of endlessly-debated terms. Cinema and sound film had thereby become the chief representatives of the new mass culture.

### **"Americanization" in the Interwar Period**

It is interesting that the contemporary conception of kitsch was so closely linked to the idea of an "Americanizing" tendency in German popular culture.

<sup>3</sup> "Backfischliteratur" means literature targeted specifically at adolescent girls (Dettmar and Küpper 112).

Debates about the Americanization of German film production began around the mid-1920s and strongly characterized critical thought about film in the inter-war period.

Beginning in 1924 Germany experienced a cultural invasion without parallel since the age of Napoleon. In the wake of the Dawes Plan and other American loans Germans encountered a wave of what they styled *Amerikanismus*, the cultural essence of a nation which worshiped technology, efficiency, and commercial success (Saunders 117).

Cinema, like kitsch, became one of the main representatives of this alleged cultural invasion: “for the broad mass of Europeans the main agent of Americanization was the moving picture” (1). This Hollywood “occupation” of German film came about not only in the form of imported films—and the *American way of life* they advertised—but also through economic and systematic associations [*Verbandelungen*] in the national film industries. Financial mergers, in particular, opened the door to American influence: as Ufa neared bankruptcy in 1925 due to a number of failed investments, Paramount and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer helped it to escape financial crisis. In return, Hollywood studios added certain conditions to their contracts and, as a result, won a great deal of influence over day-to-day business operations at Ufa. Under the management of American manager Sam Rachmann, film premières at the Ufa-Palast am Zoo transformed into ostentatious events complete with jazz concerts (Wedel 309). Furthermore, Hollywood and Germany began an active replacement of personnel, which led German filmmakers on frequent research trips to the United States. Erich Pommer, one of Ufa’s most significant film producers, had worked for some time in Hollywood before he began producing operetta films in Germany. Owing to Hollywood’s leading role in sound film production, the American “encroachment” on the German film market around 1930 was felt particularly acutely.

Typical criticisms of sound film—its superficiality, its apparent function as an economically productive but

aesthetically impoverished product on the market—appeared in discourses about “Americanized” cinema in Germany around 1925. This coincided with the increase in significance of American imports, personnel replacement, and American investors for the German film market and for German mass culture after World War I. In this context, Thomas J. Saunders write in his study about “Hollywood in Berlin”:

Hollywood became the principal villain in accounts of domestic film woes. However, stigmatization of Hollywood to explain German setbacks did not originate with mid-decade stagnation. It was rooted in earlier perceptions of the American challenge. At the end of the war film experts approached the problem of America’s global dominance with sharp antinomies. The dichotomies of ‘we’ and ‘they’ prevalent in wartime elevation of German *Kultur* carried over into postwar film debates (53).

A good five years later, these impressions characterized discussions of sound film, inasmuch as it was understood as a product saturated with American spirit. Thanks to American sound film’s prime position in the international film market, German producers—in spite of criticism—attempted to follow the same path to success, but not without some additional effort to invest it with a certain “German character.” The general director of Ufa, Ludwig Klitzsch, apparently confirmed as much after a research trip to Broadway, announcing that he wished to create a German or Austrian variant of the American musical film that would be an international hit, relying on local color such as Viennese operetta music to sell the story (Kreimeier 43).

Thus it seemed that what critics experienced as “American” and even “kitschy” in sound film had, in fact, successfully won its way into the ambiance of German productions. Films around 1930 incorporated these characteristics into their aesthetic and created a German variation on the genre (Saunders 238-239). German musical film productions presented themselves in an affected, and kitschy manner, including musical numbers

which foreclosed any possibility of a realistic approach to storytelling: “Next to them the much despised American features of the 1920s appeared almost down-to-earth” (Saunders 239). Along the example of *Ich bei Tag und Du bei Nacht*, I’d like to argue that German sound films did indeed incorporate the Americanized and kitschy aesthetic—but in a ironically ostentatious manner, creating distance to their own aesthetic output and engaging playfully with the stereotypes only recently set up by the new genre.

### **Ich bei Tag und Du bei Nacht**

The screen still black, the film opens with a simple call: “Begin!” The picture fades in on a film projector being set in motion. The camera swivels to show the equipment fully, then leads us from the projection room into the theater’s auditorium, where it swivels again to follow the beam of light to the big screen. The beginning of *Ich bei Tag und Du bei Nacht* is simultaneously the beginning of a film-within-a-film. Later we learn that the projectionist Helmut (Friedrich Gnaß), who turned on the projector in the first scene, is friends with the protagonist Hans (Willy Fritsch). The two of them discuss Hans’ problems in the projection room: he is frustrated that he cannot seem to make ends meet on his paltry wages as a busboy. The contrast between his proletarian lifestyle and the lifestyle promoted in the ostentatious operettas in the next room could not be greater. “This fairytale-reality truly proves that once one of us has his

moment of luck, dreams of happiness will bloom and tap gently on your windowpane,” Helmut reads aloud from the new sound films’ playbill. “Nonsense, it’s all a scam,” Hans mutters in response. He is convinced that nothing in his life could take a turn for the better “like it does in the movies.”

The irony here is that Hans is, indeed, a film character, and the audience’s expectations for *Ich bei Tag und Du bei Nacht* modulate everything that the two men say about the false reality of operetta films. The definition of irony undertaken by James MacDowell in his study of cinematic irony applies this situation well:

Ironic expression of all kinds involves juxtapositions between (what are offered as) limited and less limited point of view. In the case of communicative irony, this juxtaposition is achieved by feigning to possess precisely the limited point of view that is being ironized (59-60).

The aforementioned accusations of kitsch and extravagant Americanized productions leveled at German sound film around 1930, as well as the characteristic relationship of public criticism to the sound film genre, can be read in Hans’ attitude toward cinema—the film-within-a-film, shown in excerpts throughout *Ich bei Tag und Du bei Nacht* (and titled, revealingly, *All This is Yours! [Dies alles ist dein!]*), confirms and elevates stereotypes about early sound film. Apparently a love story, the film takes place in grand, palatial rooms outfitted in marble and overflowing with roses. The absurd elevation of every gesture recalls kitsch—the sequined outfits and delicate negligees must have reminded contemporary critics of the perceived American invasion in their national cinema. On the diegetic level, we experience these discourses through Hans’ cynical perspective: he thinks it’s all “nonsense.” Thus, Kracauer’s criticism of operetta films in 1930 echoes in the depiction of this film-within-a-film once again: “The more expensive the production, the cheaper the taste. Hopefully we shall soon see the three-penny sound film” (“Die neue Tonfilmoperette”).

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***The huge amount of insider information (often fiction and not always state-of-the-art) seems to lend an aura of authenticity or documentary to the film's self-preservation, and the new medium becomes sensationalized through its uniqueness.***

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## Irony in Film

*Ich bei Tag und Du bei Nacht* demonstrates that it knows its way around cinematic tendencies toward escapism through its “strategy of complicity” (Elsaesser 160) and its particular form of self-reflexivity, which strongly differentiates it from the occasionally melodramatic *Ein Schuss im Tonfilmatelier*. The film-within-a-film creates ironic contrasts between its scenes and comments on them intradiegetically. For instance, a tenor in the fictional operetta film sings a hit song entitled “When You’re Not There, the Roses Bloom in Vain [*Wenn du nicht kommst, dann haben die Rosen umsonst geblüht*]” surrounded by a huge number of roses, while a separate montage shows Hans—always underscored by the music from the film-within-a-film—waiting for his date with a humble little bouquet.

According to James MacDowell, irony in film can be interpreted as a form of dissemblance. Thomas Koebner’s formulation is prominent within German-language film theory: “Irony, a device in which one seems to take a particular attitude in earnest, is a form of intelligent dissemblance and often elegant pretense that one is performing some ritual sincerely” (Koebner 327). *Rituals* in film might include narrative formulas, a standardized mode of speech, or certain expectations modeled in “conventional” narrative sequences for a particular genre. When an ironic dissemblance functions to comment on what it depicts, it simultaneously produces a distancing effect from the diegetic narrative. This ultimately links the concept of cinematic irony-as-dissemblance with historical conceptions of irony and, more precisely, to the idea of German romantic irony as formulated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Friedrich

Schlegel. In this context, irony’s first usage elevated it above its purely rhetorical, operative meaning, and it was formulated as a more fundamental relationship between author and text: “The relationship of an author to his work, his ‘emergence’ from the literary structures of fiction, his breakthrough and transcendence of fiction which indicates a problematization of literary communication, were viewed as the true characteristics of irony” (Behler 8). Ernst Behler concludes that, as a result of this praxis, the “ironic counterpointing of illusory fiction and empirical reality” (52)—in romantic literature, irony becomes an “expression permeated with reflection and self-criticism” (67), a gesture that, at least in certain moments, recalls *Ich bei Tag und Du bei Nacht*.

## Talkies as Social Narcotic

The ironic “I know that you know that I know” gesture” (Elsaesser 160) in *Ich bei Tag und Du bei Nacht* did not escape contemporary critics’ attention. One reviewer in *Film-Kurier* from November 29, 1932 wrote:

This is also a pointed, biting irony about the pure pageantry of the talkie operetta. Well, have a look! We see a talkie with a certain heroic tenor set against two miserable, honest people, with a blaring, false Gitta Alpar, with innumerable pageboys, young maids, and liveried servants. The poor little room the two people share in a filthy rear house contrasts with the gilded halls built by Otto Hunte and the bedchambers and marble staircases in a ‘film

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<sup>4</sup> “Dazu kommt eine Fingerspitze Pfeffer-Ironie über den eitlen Kintopp-Operettenprunk: *Ein sieh’ da! Den beiden ärmlichen, aber braven Menschen wird entgegengestellt ein Kintoppfilm mit Helden tenor mit einer schmetternden falschen Gitta Alpar mit unzähligen Pagen, Zofen und galonierten Dienern. Das ärmliche Stübchen der beiden guten im schmutzigen Hinterhaus kontrastiert mit den von Otto Hunte gebauten goldprunkenden Sälen und Schlafgemächern und marmornen Freitreppen in einem «Film im Film».* Der Kintopp als soziales Narkotikum tritt gewissermaßen in Figura auf: [...] Eine außerordentlich gute Idee: Sie zu fassen zeugt von sozialem Gewissen. Ihre Ausführung aber zeugt von geschäftlicher Begabung. Denn das anspruchsvolle Publikum wird die soziale Ironie merken und sich an ihr freuen: das anspruchslose wird sie nicht merken und sich an der Kintopp-Pracht freuen.” (“Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier”).



within a film.’ The cinema certainly appears in its role as a social narcotic in these examples. [...] An exceptionally good idea. Conceiving it is a testament to social conscience. Executing it, however, is a testament to business acumen: for the sophisticated audience will note the social irony and be glad of it, whereas the humble audience will not and will delight in the grandeur of the talkies (“Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier”).<sup>4</sup>

Such accusations of ambiguity, of a simultaneously deconstructive and affirmative attitude toward the subject of the review (“a testament to social conscience”/“a testament to business acumen”) have been levied against cinematic irony many times in the postmodern era. *Ich bei Tag und Du bei Nacht* is ambiguously designed since, contrasting the critiques of operetta-kitsch—which manifest in the ambiguous relationship between the protagonist Hans and the film-within-a-film—the main character still gets to have his happy ending. At the end of the film, after a series of misunderstandings

and mix-ups, Hans finds his true love Grete (Käthe von Nagy), deciding to seek happiness with her in spite of his low socio-economic status.

This ambiguity enables certain moments of irony which integrate the audience into the story by allowing spectators to observe a film on multiple levels. Some may have no deep understanding of such ironic moments, whereas others may enjoy it with a sophisticated, knowing eye. *Ich bei Tag und Du bei Nacht* can be read as both a glorification and a criticism of cinema—it functions equally effectively as “pure entertainment” in which the film both theorizes and activates typical operetta plot structures.

This ambiguity makes irony especially significant in this moment of upheaval in German cinema around 1930, and not only as a popular entertainment device. It also managed to “sell” the new medium’s operetta-style films with all their musical, intoxicating qualities, while still serving those audiences who could interpret and enjoy multiple levels of cinematic meaning. ■

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